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PRINCESS PIRLIPATINE AND
THE NUTCRACKER.



PRINCESS
PIRLIPATINE
AND THE
NUTCRACKER

BY
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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER.	PAGE.
I. THE PRINCESS IS BORN - - -	1
II. THE ROYAL BANQUET - - -	10
III. EHU DAPPLEBLOCK APPEARS - - -	20
IV. THE FATE OF THE PRINCESS - - -	26
V. CONCERNING THE KRAKATUK - - -	35
VI. EHU AND THE ASTRONOMER SET OUT - - -	46
VII. EHU DISCOVERS THE NUT - - -	53
VIII. NIKKY APPEARS - - -	61
IX. THE KRAKATUK TOURNAMENT - - -	69
X. NIKKY CRACKS THE NUT - - -	76
XI. WHAT HAPPENED AFTERWARDS - - -	84
XII. THE PRINCESS AGAIN IN TROUBLE - - -	90
XIII. THE DISASTROUS BANQUET - - -	100
XIV. EHU TRIES AGAIN - - -	109
XV. THE SEARCH FOR THE BANGALU - - -	116
XVI. EHU CONTRIVES - - -	125
XVII. THE COMBAT - - -	133
POSTSCRIPT - - -	145

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

I.	THE KING TASTES THE PUDDING (p. 9)	Frontispiece
II.	"NOT ENOUGH BACON"	PAGE 15
III.	THE PRINCESS BECOMES A MOUSE	30
IV.	THE TRAVELLERS' RETURN	51
V.	NIKKY CRACKS THE NUT	80
VI.	THE BANQUET	101
VII.	THE BANGALU TREE	123
VIII.	NIKKY AND THE PRINCESS	140

CHAPTER I.

How the Princess Pirlipatine was born,
and how the King, her father, decided
to celebrate her birth.

Once upon a time, not far from the town of Berylia, there was a little kingdom which was neither Polish nor Austrian nor Hungarian nor Italian nor Swiss, and it was governed by a King.

Now the wife of this King (who consequently was a Queen) had a baby daughter; and this daughter, being a Princess by birth, received the pleasant and distinguished name of Pirlipatine.

When the Princess arrived, the King was immediately informed of this happy event. He ran breathlessly to the Queen's chamber, and, seeing this pretty little girl lying in her cradle,

was completely carried away with delight at being the father of so charming a babe. At first he could only utter cries of joy, then he began to dance round the cradle, then hopping about on one leg he kept repeating :

“Goodness gracious ! Have you ever seen anything so beautiful as my Pirlipatine ?”

Behind the King came the ministers, the generals, the great officers of state, the privy councillors, and the judges ; and all of them, seeing the King hopping about on one leg, began to imitate him, crying :

“No, no, never, Sire, never, never in all the world has there ever been anything so beautiful as your Pirlipatine.”

And indeed, although you may be surprised to hear it, there was really no flattery in these words ; for in fact never since the creation of the world had such a beautiful Princess been born as Princess Pirlipatine. Her little body seemed to be made of a delicate silken tissue, pink as a rose and white as a lily. Her eyes

were of the deepest azure, intensely bright, and nothing could be more charming than her golden locks, falling in delightful little curls about her snowy shoulders. Added to this, she had already two small rows of teeth, more like pearls than teeth, with which, two hours after her arrival, she bit the finger of the Grand Chancellor (who, being short-sighted, had stooped to look at her more closely) so vigorously that although a taciturn and philosophical man, he is said to have cried out:

“Oh the blazes!”

Others, however, having regard for his philosophical nature, aver that he said only:

“Oh! oh! oh!”

Even to-day opinion is divided upon this important point; neither side being willing to give way. And the only thing upon which the “blazers” and the “ohers” are agreed, the only fact which is incontestable, is that the Princess Pirlipatine bit the Grand Chancellor’s finger. Thenceforth the whole country knew

that there was as much spirit as beauty in the pretty little body of Pirlipatine.

Everybody, then, was happy in this favoured kingdom. I say everybody, but the Queen herself was troubled and anxious without anyone knowing why. All were struck by the extraordinary care with which she caused her child's cradle to be guarded. Not only were all the doorways filled with detachments of the Life-Guard, but besides the two Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary who watched continually over the Princess, there were six Nurses-in-Ordinary who sat round her cradle, and these were changed every night. But the fact which excited everyone's curiosity more than anything else, and what nobody could make head or tail of, was why each of these six nurses was obliged to hold a cat in her lap and to stroke it all night long so that it never stopped purring.

I am quite sure that you are as curious as the inhabitants of this nameless little kingdom

to know why these six nurses were obliged to hold cats in their laps and to stroke them without stopping so that they never ceased purring for a moment. But as you could not possibly guess the answer to this riddle, I will tell you so that you will be spared the headache which you would assuredly get if you were to puzzle over it for too long. It was like this.

It happened one day that half-a-dozen of quite the best Kings and Queens in that part of the country agreed to pay a visit to the future father of the Princess; for at that time the Princess was not yet born. They were accompanied by the Royal Princes, by the hereditary Grand Dukes, and by all the most agreeable Pretenders.

It was an event of such importance for the King whom they were visiting (who was one of the most magnificent monarchs) that he felt obliged to make a heavy inroad upon his treasury, and to hold tournaments, pageants, and plays in their honour. But that was not

all. Having learnt from the Superintendent of the Royal Kitchens that the Astronomer-Royal had announced that the time for killing pigs was at hand, and that the conjunction of the stars indicated that it would be a favourable year for making bacon, he ordered that there should be a great slaying of pigs in all the royal piggeries. Then, getting into his coach, he went in person to each of the Kings and each of the Princes and each of the Grand Dukes and each of the Pretenders who were staying at that moment in his capital, and invited them all to dinner with him; for he wanted to enjoy their surprise at beholding the magnificent banquet which he intended giving. Then, as soon as ever he reached home, he went straight to the Queen's apartments, and going up to her said in the wheedling tone which he always used when he wanted anything:

“My dear, you haven't forgotten how fond I am of black-pudding, have you? Tell me

you haven't forgotten."

At the very first word the Queen understood what the King wanted. In fact Her Majesty plainly understood by these insidious words that she would have to make (as she had already made many times before) with her own royal hands, the largest possible quantity of sausages, chitterlings, and black-puddings. Then she smiled at her husband's suggestion, for although she carried out her duties as a Queen very honourably and creditably, yet she was less sensible to compliments paid her regarding the dignity with which she bore the sceptre and the crown than she was to compliments on her skill in making puddings or sweetmeats. Therefore she made a graceful curtsy to her husband, saying that it was as much her part to make black-puddings for the King as it was for her to do anything else.

The Grand Treasurer was at once ordered to deliver up to the Royal Kitchen the huge cauldron of silver-gilt and the great silver

stewpans which were always used for making black-puddings and sausages. An enormous fire of sandal-wood was lit. The Queen put on her cooking apron of white damask, and soon the most delicious odour was coming from the cauldron. This delightful smell spread rapidly down all the corridors, penetrated into all the rooms of the palace, and finally reached the Throne-Room, where the King was holding a council.

Now the King was a great epicure, and this smell gave him a lively pleasure. Nevertheless, seeing that he was a serious Prince and had a reputation for coolness in all emergencies, he withstood for some time the attraction which urged him towards the kitchen. But at last, in spite of his control over his emotions, he was forced to yield to the irresistible perfume which assailed his nostrils.

"Gentlemen," he said, getting up, "with your permission I must retire for a moment. I shall be back in a minute. Wait till I come."

And, crossing the rooms and the corridors, he made his way hastily towards the kitchen.

Pushing open the door, he folded the Queen in his arms; then he stirred the contents of the cauldron with his sceptre, then licked the top of the sceptre thoughtfully with the tip of his tongue. Having thus regained his composure, he returned to the council and took up (though a trifle preoccupied) the discussion at the point where he had dropped it.

CHAPTER II.

Of the Royal Banquet, and what befel thereat.

The King had left the kitchen just at the important moment when the bacon, cut up in morsels, was about to be roasted on the silver gridiron. The Queen, encouraged by his praises, was herself attending to this important operation, and the first drops of fat were already beginning to fall hissing upon the fire, when a little trembling voice was heard saying:

“My sister, give me a morsel to eat,
Though I'm also a Queen t'will be a
treat,
So spare me a piece of your roasted
fat;
For I rarely taste anything quite like
that.”

The Queen recognised the voice immediately: it was that of the Lady Mousekin.

Dame Mousekin had lived in the palace for many years. She professed to be related to the Royal Family, and called herself Queen of the Mouse Tribe. For she held a very considerable court beneath the kitchen hearth.

The Queen was a kind and generous woman, and although she refused openly to recognise the Lady Mousekin as a Queen and sister, yet secretly she had a tender regard for her, and was so indulgent towards her that her husband often reproached her for acting thus beneath her dignity. Therefore, as you will readily understand, upon this important occasion the Queen had not the heart to refuse her small friend. So she said:

“Come along, Dame Mousekin, you can come out boldly. I give you my permission to taste the bacon as much as you please.”

In an instant Dame Mousekin appeared, gay and frisky, and, jumping upon the fender,

deftly seized with her small paws the morsels of bacon which the Queen handed to her one after the other.

But all at once, attracted by the shrill cries of pleasure which their Queen was uttering, and especially by the toothsome smell which arose from the grilled bacon, the seven sons of Dame Mousekin, their wives and their relations, rushed up frisking and dancing just like her. They were mischievous rascals, dreadfully quick with their little mouths, and they threw themselves upon the bacon in such a way that the Queen was obliged, hospitable as she was, to remark that if they continued in this fashion there would be no bacon left for the puddings. But in spite of the justice of this remark, the seven sons of Dame Mousekin paid not the slightest attention. Setting a disgraceful example to their wives and relations, and in spite of the protests of their mother and queen, they threw themselves upon the bacon, which would have dis-

appeared in a trice had not the cries of the Queen, who was unable to chase away all her importunate guests, brought up the Superintendent-of-the-Kitchens at a run. The Superintendent called the Head Cook, the Head Cook called the Head Scullion, and the Head Scullion called the Head Turnspit. Dashing up armed with brooms, ladles and rolling-pins, they succeeded in driving all the mice under the hearth.

But the victory, although it was a complete one, was very nearly too late; hardly a quarter of the bacon necessary for making chitterlings, sausages, and puddings remained. This remainder was divided scientifically (according to the calculations of the King's Mathematician, who had been sent for in haste) between the great cauldron in which the puddings were boiling and the two great stew-pans containing the chitterlings and sausages.

Half an hour after this event cannons suddenly roared, and clarions and trumpets

sounded. All the Kings and Queens and all the Royal Princes and all the hereditary Grand Dukes and all the Pretenders who were in the capital began to arrive. They were dressed in their most magnificent clothes; some rode in crystal coaches, others came on their review horses. The King received them at the steps of the palace, and greeted them with the most charming courtesy and graceful cordiality. Then, when they had left their cloaks and umbrellas in the hall, he led them into the dining room and took up his seat at the head of the table, for he was their suzerain or over-lord, being head of all the Kings in those parts. The other Kings and Queens and Royal Princes and hereditary Grand Dukes and agreeable Pretenders sat down at the table in strict order of precedence.

The table was sumptuously laid, and all went well between the soup and the entrée. But when the chitterlings came on everyone noticed that the King seemed agitated; when



the sausages arrived he turned pale ; and the black pudding was hardly placed before him when he cast up his eyes and uttered a heart-broken sigh. Then some terrible anguish seemed to take possession of him : he fell over the back of his chair, covered his face with his hands, and wept in a most heart-rending way. The guests sprang up from their seats and gathered round him in the greatest alarm. The crisis seemed grave indeed ; the Court Physician felt for his pulse in vain ; the King was apparently afflicted by a most serious, a most alarming, and a most unheard of malady.

Finally, after the most violent remedies had been tried (such as holding burning feathers and smelling-salts under his nose, dropping door-keys down his back, and pouring hot soup in his boots) the King appeared to recover somewhat. He opened his eyes, and, in a voice so feeble that it could scarcely be heard, whispered :

"NOT ENOUGH BACON."

At these words it was the Queen's turn to grow pale. She threw herself on her knees, and cried in a voice stifled with sobs:

"Oh my unhappy, unfortunate, and royal spouse! What distress have I caused you by not listening to the advice which you have given me so often? Behold the culprit at your knees, punish her as severely as she deserves."

"What's that?" said the King; "what on earth have you been doing that you haven't told me about?"

"Alas! alas!" replied the Queen, to whom her husband had never spoken so rudely or ungrammatically before; "alas! it was Dame Mousekin with her seven sons, their wives, their cousins, and their relations, who devoured all the bacon!"

But the Queen could say no more. Her grief overcame her; she fell on the carpet and fainted.

Then the King got up, furious, and cried out in a terrible voice:

“MADAME SUPERINTENDENT, WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS ?”

Then the Superintendent came forward trembling, and related all that she knew, namely, how, attracted by the cries of the Queen, she had seen Her Majesty battling with the whole family of Dame Mousekin, and how she in her turn had called out to the Head Cook, who, assisted by the Scullions (who were assisted by the Turnspits), had forced all the robbers to retreat under the hearth.

Immediately the King, seeing at once that it was a case of high treason, recovered his dignity and his calm, and ordered that, in view of the enormity of the crime, his Privy Council should assemble forthwith and that the matter should be placed before the wisest of his councillors.

Forthwith the council assembled, and after some hours of discussion, it was decided, by a majority, that as Dame Mousekin was accused of having eaten the bacon destined for

the King's sausages, the King's black-puddings, and the King's chitterlings, the King's writ should be served upon her, and that if she were found guilty she should be condemned to perpetual banishment, *nolens volens*, from the kingdom, together with all her tribe, and that whatsoever goods and chattels she possessed, both in lands, castles, fortresses, royal residences, and hereditaments, should be forfeited to the King.

The King, however, took occasion to point out to his Privy Council that during all the time this action was being tried, the Lady Mousekin and her family would have plenty of time to eat up all his bacon; and this would expose him to other affronts similar to the one which he had just experienced in the presence of six crowned heads, not to mention the Princes of royal blood, the hereditary Grand Dukes and the Pretenders. He demanded, therefore, that a discretionary power should be granted him with regard to Dame Mousekin

and her family.

The Council immediately agreed to this proposal. It was carried unanimously, and the King was formally accorded the discretionary power for which he had asked.

CHAPTER III.

Ehu Dappleblock appears.

The King took action immediately. He sent one of his best carriages, preceded by an out-rider (in order to hurry things up), to a certain very skilful craftsman who lived in the town of Berylia and was called Ehu Dappleblock, inviting him to come to the palace at once on a very urgent affair. Ehu Dappleblock obeyed immediately; for, besides being a well disciplined man, he was a shrewd fellow, and knew well that so famous a King would not send for him unless he wished him to contrive some masterpiece. So, getting into the carriage, he travelled night and day until he arrived at the palace. In fact he had hurried

so much that he had not even had time to put any clothes into his portmanteau, and he came into the King's presence in the old yellow overcoat which he usually wore. But instead of being annoyed at this breach of etiquette, the King thanked Ehu for coming, for, if he had committed a fault, the distinguished craftsman (being a well-disciplined man) had at least committed it unwittingly by obeying the King's commands so promptly.

The King took Dappleblock into his study and explained the situation to him. His Majesty was determined to set an example by purging the whole kingdom of the Mouse tribe, and having heard of Dappleblock's skill, he had decided to make Ehu the instrument which should execute his justice. One thing only he feared: that the craftsman, clever as he was, should consider the difficulties of the project insurmountable.

But Ehu Dappleblock reassured the King, and promised him that in eight days there

should not be a single mouse left in all the kingdom.

The same day Ehu caused some curious little oblong boxes to be made, and in each of these he placed a morsel of bacon on the end of a piece of wire. In nibbling the bacon, the thief, whoever he might be, would cause a little trap-door to shut behind him and so make him a prisoner. In less than a week a hundred of these boxes had been made and placed—not only under the hearth, but in all the granaries and cellars of the palace.

Dame Mousekin was far too wise and too far-seeing not to discover Master Dappleblock's ruse at the very first glance. She summoned her seven sons, their wives, their nephews and their cousins, to warn them of the plot which had been contrived against them. But, after listening with the respect which they owed to her rank and age, they retired laughing at her fears, and, attracted by the smell of the roasted bacon (which had

more effect upon them than all the arguments of their mother), they resolved to profit by this sudden windfall which had come to them from goodness knows where.

At the end of twenty-four hours the seven sons of Dame Mousekin, their seven wives, eighteen nephews, fifty cousins, and two hundred and thirty five of their relations in varying degrees (without counting some thousands of Dame Mousekin's other subjects) had been caught in the mouse-traps and ignominiously put to death. Then Dame Mousekin, with the remnant of her Court and the remainder of her people, resolved to abandon the haunts thus stained with the blood of her subjects.

The report of this resolution soon came to the King's ears. His Majesty was transported with joy, the Court Poets wrote eloquent sonnets on his victory, whilst the ladies of the Court likened him to Sesostris, Alexander, and Cæsar.

The Queen alone was sad and troubled. She knew Dame Mousekin only too well, and was aware that the Mouse-Queen would never allow the death of her sons and relations to pass unavenged. Indeed at the very moment when the Queen was preparing for the King, with her own hands, a purée of liver (of which he was particularly fond) in order to make him forget her offence, Dame Mousekin suddenly appeared before her. Shaking her paw at the trembling Queen, Dame Mousekin uttered these ominous words:

Though murder of my sons assuage
Your husband's unrelenting rage,
Yet tremble, royal Queen.
The child which you will shortly see,
The object of your love, shall be
The object of my spleen.
The King has wise men by the score,
Soldiers and cannons, forts galore,
And lots of mouse-traps, too.
I lack these things, but I've a charm
Which to your babe shall bring much
harm,
And quickly make you rue.

Thereupon she disappeared, and from that moment nobody had seen her again. But the Queen, who had been told by the Astronomer-Royal a few days before that she was going to have a baby, was so terrified by this prediction that she allowed all the purée to fall into the fire.

Thus for the second time Dame Mousekin deprived the King of one of his favourite dishes. This made him more angry than ever, and he congratulated himself on the coup d'état which he had so happily brought about.

Needless to say Ehu Dappleblock was presented with a magnificent reward, and he returned in triumph to Berylia.

CHAPTER IV.

Of the lamentable fate of the
Princess Pirlipatine.

So now you will understand why it was that the Queen took such elaborate precautions to guard the wonderful little Princess Pirlipatine. She dreaded the vengeance of Dame Mousekin; for, after what that lady had said, the Queen knew that her malice would be directed not only against the Princess as heir to the throne of this happy little nameless kingdom, but against Pirlipatine's very life—or even against her beauty, which is of even more importance to a Princess.

The poor Queen's fear increased when it was found that all the contrivances of Ehu Dappleblock were powerless against the wis-

dom of the Lady Mousekin. The Astronomer-Royal alone was able to afford her consolation. Being a great prophet and wizard, and fearing lest the King should suppress his office as useless unless he had something to say about the affair, he pretended to have read in the stars, in no uncertain way, that the family of the royal and illustrious Cat Murr alone was capable of preventing Dame Mousekin from approaching the royal cradle. It was for this reason that each of the six nurses was obliged continually to hold one of the tom-cats of this distinguished family on her knees. Mistress Murr and her family were attached to the Court as Lap-Warmers-in-Ordinary, and, by a course of delicate and prolonged stroking, had become so proficient in their duties that they could enable the most crusty diplomatists to smooth out the most intricate affairs of state in a few minutes.

But one evening (there are days, as you are doubtless aware, when one gets up, dresses,

and goes about one's business in a dream, being really asleep all the time); one evening, I say, the six Nurses-in-Ordinary sitting round the room, each with a cat on her knees, and the two Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary, who were sitting beside the Princess' pillow, felt sleep overcoming them one by one in spite of all their efforts to keep awake. As each one perceived this sensation coming over her, she took care not to let her companion see it, hoping that her lack of vigilance would pass unnoticed, and that her fellow Nurses-in-Ordinary would keep watch for her whilst she slept. The result was that their eyes closed one after the other; the hands which were stroking the cats stopped; and the cats, feeling this, took advantage of the circumstance to doze.

How long this strange sleep lasted I am unable to say; but about midnight one of the Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary woke up with a start. All the nurses round her seemed to be

sunk in a deep slumber; not a snore could be heard; even their breathing seemed to have stopped; in fact complete silence reigned. And in the midst of this strange silence she heard a curious noise.

It was like somebody whispering in a high-pitched voice.

Imagine her fright then on beholding, close to her, standing on its hind paws at the foot of the cradle—a mouse!

The Chief-Nurse-Extraordinary uttered a cry of terror. At the sound everyone awoke; but Dame Mousekin (for it was she) flew towards a corner of the room. The Lap-Warmers-in-Ordinary dashed after her; but alas! too late; Dame Mousekin had disappeared through a chink in the floor. At the same moment the Princess Pirlipatine, awakened by the uproar, began to cry.

At the sound of her voice the Nurses-in-Ordinary and Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary uttered exclamations of joy.

“Heaven be praised,” said they; “so long as the Princess Pirlipatine cries she can’t be dead.”

Then they all rushed to the cradle, but their exclamations of joy gave place to cries of dismay when they saw what had happened to the delicate and charming little Pirlipatine.

In place of her pink and rosy face, in place of her little head covered with golden curls, in place of her azure eyes, blue as the sky, were two sharp little brown eyes and a little pointed snout with whiskers! The Princess Pirlipatine had turned into a mouse—at least so far as her head was concerned!

At this moment the Queen came into the room. The six Nurses-in-Ordinary and the two Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary threw themselves face downwards on the floor, whilst the six Lap-Warmers-in-Ordinary looked anxiously about to see whether anybody had by chance left a window open by which they could gain the roof.



The grief of the poor Queen was piteous to behold. She was carried fainting from the room. But the distress of the unfortunate father was even more lamentable—it was simply heart-breaking. They were obliged to put padlocks on the windows of his room lest he should throw himself out, and to pad the walls for fear that he should break his head against them. Needless to say his sword was taken from him at once, and all knives and forks were removed from his sight as well as everything sharp or pointed. For the first two or three days he refused to eat anything, to the dismay of the royal attendants, and kept repeating:

“O unhappy monarch that I am! O cruel, cruel fate!”

Instead of accusing Fate, however, the King should have remembered that, like all other people, he had brought about his own misfortune himself. If he had only been content to eat the black-puddings with a little less

bacon than usual, and if, instead of seeking vengeance, he had left Dame Mousekin and her family alone under the hearth, the misfortune which he now bewailed would never have happened at all. But I regret to say that the royal father of Pirlipatine never once looked at the matter in this philosophical light. On the contrary, just as those in authority always throw the blame for their misfortunes upon somebody else, so the King threw the whole blame on Ehu Dappleblock. But knowing quite well that if he commanded Ehu to return to the Court immediately to be hanged or have his head cut off, Ehu would be particularly careful to refuse the invitation, the King invited him to come and receive a new Order of Knighthood which His Majesty had just created for men-of-letters, artists, and craftsmen.

Dappleblock was not free from pride. He thought that a ribbon would look well on his yellow coat, and he set out immediately for

the palace. But his joy soon changed to sadness, for at the frontier of the kingdom guards were waiting for him. He was arrested and brought in chains to the capital.

The King, who doubtless feared lest Ehu's tears should move him to pity, refused to see Dappleblock when he arrived at the palace, but ordered that he should be led immediately before the Princess Pirlipatine's cradle, and that he should be informed that if, in one month from to-day, the Princess' head had not resumed its normal shape, his own head should be cut off without mercy.

Ehu did not pretend to be a hero, and he had never anticipated dying in any but a perfectly natural way. It had always seemed to him so foolish to die in one's boots when one could remove them and pass away comfortably in bed. So he was distinctly put out by this threat. Nevertheless, relying upon his great knowledge (the extent of which his modesty had never prevented him from appre-

ciating), he plucked up heart and immediately set about the first and most useful thing he could think of doing—which was to see whether the calamity would yield to some sort of remedy or whether it was quite incurable, as he had feared at the first glance.

To this end he deftly took the Princess to pieces. First he removed her head, then her limbs in turn, then he took off her feet and hands in order that he might examine at his leisure not only her joints and springs but also her whole internal machinery. But alas! the more he probed into these mysteries of the Princess Pirlipatine's organism, the more pronounced her likeness to a mouse became. Sorrowfully he put her together again, and, not knowing what else to do or which way to turn, he sat down beside the cradle which he would never be allowed to leave until the Princess had resumed her normal appearance, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER V.

Ehu sets out to find the Krakatuk.

The fourth week had already begun, and it was now Wednesday, when, according to his custom, the King came into the room to see whether any change had yet taken place in the Princess' appearance. He peered anxiously into the cradle, and seeing that the Princess still retained her mouse-like shape, he flew into a violent rage. Shaking his sceptre at the craftsman, he cried out:

“Ehu Dappleblock! Look to yourself! You have only three days left in which to restore my daughter to me as she was before. If you persist in refusing to cure her, your head shall be struck off on Sunday before breakfast.”

It was inability not obstinacy which prevented Master Dappleblock from curing the Princess. He began to weep bitterly, gazing, with his eyes swimming with tears, at the Princess Pirlipatine, who was cracking a nut with her sharp little teeth as happily as though she were the prettiest little girl in the world.

At this affecting sight Ehu was suddenly struck with the peculiar taste which the Princess had manifested ever since her birth for nuts, and with the singular fact that she had been born with teeth. In fact the moment she had been transformed she had begun to cry out and had continued to cry out until, finding a filbert in her bed, she had cracked it with her teeth, nibbled the kernel, and had gone quietly to sleep. Ever since then the two Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary had been obliged to stuff their pockets with nuts and to give her one or more whenever she made a grimace.

“O marvellous instinct of nature! O eternal and inscrutable affinity between all created

beings!" cried Ehu Dappleblock. "You have shown me the door which leads to the discovery of thy mysteries! I will knock upon it and it shall open unto me."

At these strange words, which startled the King considerably, Dappleblock turned round and demanded the favour of being taken forthwith to the Astronomer-Royal. The King consented, but only on condition that he went under a strong escort. Ehu would doubtless have preferred to have gone alone; but since he had very little say in the matter he was obliged to put up with what he couldn't help, and was forced to cross the streets of the capital guarded like a prisoner.

Arrived at the house of the Astronomer-Royal Dappleblock threw himself into the wizard's arms, and the two embraced each other with torrents of tears, for they were old acquaintances and were really very fond of each other. Then they retired to a secluded room and consulted a large number of books

which dealt with instinct, affinities, antipathies, and a host of other things no less mysterious. Finally, night having overtaken them at their labours, the Astronomer mounted his tower and assisted by Ehu (who himself was well practised in these things) discovered that, in spite of the maze of correlatives, reciprocals, and counterparts which crossed the Princess' horoscope again and again, in order to break the spell which made Pirlipatine mouse-like, and in order to restore her to her former beauty, there was only one thing to be done.

She would have to eat the kernel of the nut Krakatuk.

Now the nut Krakatuk has a very hard shell, so hard that you can wheel a cannon of the largest size over it without breaking it. Yet the stars clearly showed that it was essential that the shell should be broken, in the presence of the Princess, by the teeth of a young man who had never yet been shaved and had never

worn anything except top-boots. Lastly, the kernel would have to be handed by him to the Princess with his eyes shut, and, with his eyes still shut, he would then have to take seven steps backwards without stumbling. Such was the verdict of the stars.

Dappleblock and the wizard had worked without stopping for three days and three nights in clearing up this mystery. The escort was quite impatient when at last he appeared. Together they returned to the palace.

It was now Saturday evening, and the King had already dined and was starting on the dessert, when Ehu (who was going to be beheaded at dawn the next day) entered the royal dining room. He was full of joy and was smiling broadly. Walking jauntily up to the King he announced joyfully that he had at last discovered a way to restore her beauty to the Princess Pirlipatine.

At this news the King folded him to his breast with the most touching cordiality, and

asked what the remedy was.

Dappleblock informed the King of the result of his conference with the Astronomer-Royal.

“My dear Ehu,” said the King, “I was quite certain all the time that it was only your pride which prevented you from doing all this long ago. However, better late than never: for my part I shouldn’t for a moment have allowed *my* pride to interfere with the little arrangement we had made for to-morrow morning. Immediately after dinner, then, we will put your theory into practice. See to it, therefore, good Dappleblock, that in ten minutes’ time the unshaven youth, dressed in boots, shall be here with the nut Krakatuk in his hand. But be particularly careful that no one gives him any wine to drink, otherwise he might stumble when he makes his seven steps backwards like a crayfish. Afterwards—well you can tell him that if he does his task successfully the royal cellars will be at his disposal.”

To the King’s astonishment, however, Ehu

appeared to be thunderstruck at these words; and, as he stood there twiddling his thumbs in silence, the King asked him what was the matter, and why he didn't dash off at once to execute his sovereign's orders. But Ehu threw himself on his knees before the King, and bursting into tears, cried out:

“Oh Sire! it is true indeed that we, I mean I, have discovered the means of curing the Princess, and that the remedy consists of making her eat the kernel of the nut Krakatuk, provided it has been cracked by a young man who has never been shaved and who has worn top-boots ever since his birth; but there isn't a young man like this anywhere in the palace or the capital—much less a nut. We haven't the slightest idea where to find either the one or the other, and in all probability it will be a hard and long search to find them.”

At these words the King became furious. Brandishing his sceptre over the head of the craftsman, he cried in a terrible voice:

“VERY WELL, THEN, PREPARE FOR DEATH!”

At these words the Queen, who was sitting close to him, came and knelt beside Dappleblock and observed to her royal spouse that if he cut off Ehu's head, they would lose even this ray of hope. The only chance of curing Pirlipatine appeared to be by keeping him alive. It was quite probable, she said, that one who had been so clever as to discover this horoscope would also be able to discover the nut and the nutcracker. Moreover, she argued, it was more reasonable to believe this latest prediction of the Astronomer since none of his predictions had ever come true yet, and one of them was bound to come true some day or other, seeing that the King, whom it was impossible to deceive, had appointed him Astronomer-Royal. Furthermore, the Princess Pirlipatine, being scarcely three months old, was not yet old enough to marry, and in all likelihood would not be old enough to marry.

until she was fifteen ; therefore Master Dappleblock and his friend the Astronomer had fourteen years and nine months before them in which to find the nut Krakatuk and the young man who was to crack it. Lastly, she suggested that a respite should be granted to Ehu Dappleblock, provided that he would promise to return at the end of it and place himself in the King's hands once more, whether or not he was in possession of the remedy which could cure the Princess. If he came back empty-handed he should be beheaded without mercy, but if he succeeded, he should be magnificently rewarded.

The King, who was a very conscientious man (and he had just dined off two of his most favourite dishes, namely, a black-pudding and a purée of liver) lent a kindly ear to the prayer of his sensible and magnanimous spouse. He decided, therefore, that Ehu and the Astronomer should set out that very instant in search of the nut and the nutcracker,

and that fourteen years and nine months should be allowed them for the search. But he stipulated that at the expiration of this respite, both should return and place themselves in his power again, so that, in the event of their failure, he might accord them their proper deserts.

If, on the contrary, however, they brought back the nut Krakatuk and restored the Princess Pirlipatine to her former beauty, they should be superbly rewarded. The Astronomer should receive a life pension of a thousand rose-nobles and a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, and the craftsman a sword studded with diamonds, the Order of the Golden Mushroom (which was the highest Order of the State) and a new overcoat. As for the young man who was going to crack the nut, the King didn't trouble very much about him. One could always procure the means, he said, of having his name inserted repeatedly in the home and foreign press.

Touched by this generosity, which did away with half the difficulty of his task, Ehu gave his word that either he would find the nut Krakatuk or would return, like another Regulus, and replace himself in the King's hands.

So the same evening the Craftsman and the Astronomer quitted the capital and began their search.

CHAPTER VI.

How Ehu Dappleblock and the Astronomer
searched the four corners of the globe and
discovered a fifth, but without finding the
nut Krakatuk.

It was now fourteen years and five months since the Astrologer and the Craftsman had taken to the road, and as yet they had not found a single trace of what they sought. They had visited Europe first, then America, then Africa, then Asia; they had even discovered a fifth continent, which the geographers have since called Australia, because the Austrians had failed to discover it. But in all their wanderings, although they had come across plenty of nuts of every conceivable shape and size, they had not found the nut Krakatuk. In a vain hope of success they had passed some years at the Court of the

King of Dates—they had even spent some time with the Prince of Almonds; they consulted, fruitlessly, the famous Academy of Green Monkeys, and the celebrated Society of Squirrels. At last, worn out with fatigue, they reached the borders of the great forest which clothes the foot of the Himalayas. Sitting down under a large tree which was covered with golden fruit, they reminded one another that they had only one hundred and twenty two days left in which to find what they had sought in vain for fourteen years and five months.

If I were to tell you all the marvellous adventures which befell the two travellers during their long peregrination, it would take me at least a month and would certainly tire you out. So I will only say that Ehu Dappleblock, being the more determined of the two since his head depended upon their success or failure, had exposed himself to greater hardships and dangers than his companion, and had

lost all his hair, as the result of a sunstroke when they were crossing the Equator, and also his right eye, the result of the arrow of a Caribbeean chief. Moreover, his yellow overcoat, which he had insisted upon wearing all the time, had certainly not improved in appearance since he left Berylia, and it was now literally in rags. Thus you will readily understand that his appearance was really deplorable. Yet so strong is the instinct of self-preservation in man, that, worn out as he was by the adventures and the hardships which he had suffered, he saw with increasing fright the approach of that fateful time when he would have to return to civilization. For it meant that he would be obliged to place himself once more in the King's hands.

Nevertheless, Dappleblock was a man of honour. There was no hesitating in the face of a promise as solemn as that which he had made. He resolved accordingly, cost him what it might, to set out on his return to Berylia

the following day. Indeed there was no time to lose; fourteen years and five months had passed, and the two travellers had now only one hundred and twenty-two days in which to regain the capital of the Princess Pirlipatine's father.

Ehu Dappleblock communicated his generous resolve to his friend the Astronomer, and they decided to begin their return journey on the following morning.

Next day, at dawn, the travellers set out, shaping a course for Baghdad. From Baghdad they reached Alexandria; at Alexandria they embarked for Venice; from Venice they gained Tyrol; and from Tyrol they descended into the kingdom of Pirlipatine's father, secretly hoping that the King would be dead or at least in his second childhood.

But alas! nothing of the sort had happened. When they arrived at the capital the unfortunate Craftsman learnt that the worthy King was not only in full possession of all his

faculties, but that he was in excellent health and rather more testy than usual. There seemed to be no hope for Dappleblock—unless by chance the Princess had been cured of her infirmity, which was very improbable, or that the King's heart had softened, which was still more improbable—to escape the awful fate which threatened him.

However, he presented himself boldly at the gate of the palace—fortified by the thought that he was performing a really heroic action—and demanded an audience of the King.

The King, who was always accessible to his subjects and made a point of interviewing personally everyone who came to see him upon business, commanded the Grand Usher to lead the two travellers before him.

The Grand Usher took occasion to observe to His Majesty that the two strangers didn't look very respectable and were wearing really the most appalling clothes. But the King replied that one should not judge the heart



by the face, and that the hood did not make the monk.

So the Grand Usher, recognising the truth of these maxims, bowed respectfully and went to fetch the Craftsman and the Astronomer.

The King had not altered in the least. The travellers recognised his voice talking to the cook long before they saw him; and when he appeared they knew him at once. But they themselves were so changed, especially poor Ehu, that they were obliged to mention their names. On learning who they were the King uttered a cry of joy, for he had made up his mind long ago that they would never come back unless they had found the nut Krakatuk. But he was soon disillusioned, for the Craftsman, throwing himself at the King's feet, confessed that in spite of the most conscientious and assiduous search, he and his friend the Astronomer had returned with empty hands.

The King, although rather a hasty man, was really very kind at heart. He was touched

with the scrupulousness with which Dappleblock had kept his word, and he instantly commuted his death sentence to that of penal servitude for life. As for the Astronomer, the King was content to exile him for ever.

There were still three days left, however, out of the fourteen years and nine months' respite granted to them, so Ehu, who was exceedingly fond of his own country, asked the King's permission to pay a farewell visit to his home at Berylia. The request seemed a just one to the King, so he granted it without any restrictions.

Ehu Dappleblock, with only three days left to himself, resolved to profit by the time, and being lucky enough to find a vacant corner seat in the mail-coach, set out immediately. At the last minute the Astronomer, who, since he was to be exiled, might just as well go to Berylia as anywhere else, squeezed in beside him.

CHAPTER VII.

Ehu discovers the nut Krakatuk.

On the following day, about ten o'clock in the morning, Dappleblock and his companion arrived at Berylia. Ehu's only relation was a brother named Ezra Dappleblock, who was one of the most important toy-makers in Berylia. Accordingly they made their way to his house.

Ezra Dappleblock was delighted to see poor Ehu again, for he had long given him up for dead. At first the toy-maker did not recognise him, owing to Ehu's bald head and the green patch over his right eye; but Ehu showed him his yellow overcoat which, tattered though it was, still preserved its original colour in places, and, in addition to this positive proof,

he told Ezra certain family secrets which could not possibly have been known by anybody else. So the toy-maker was obliged to acknowledge Ehu as his brother. Then, in his turn, he asked Ehu why he had been away from his native town for so long, and where he had left his hair, his eye, and the rest of his overcoat.

Ehu had no object in concealing his adventures from his brother. So he began by introducing the Astronomer to him. Then, when this had been successfully accomplished, he related all his misfortunes, from A to Z, and finished by saying that he had less than forty-eight hours to spend with his brother, seeing that owing to his failure to find the Krakatuk, he was going into prison on the following day.

During this recital Ezra behaved in a very extraordinary manner. He cracked his fingers, spun round on his heel, and clicked his tongue more than once. On any other occasion Ehu would doubtless have asked him what he

meant by these contortions; but he was so preoccupied that he did not notice anything unusual in his brother's behaviour. It was only when Ezra said "hum! hum!" twice, and "oh! oh! oh!" three times, that Ehu asked him what he meant by these expressions.

"I mean, ho! ho!" said Ezra, "that if it's all wrong it may be all right, ho! ho! If it won't be it will, ho! ho! ho!"

"What will be all right?" asked Ehu.

"Unless.....," continued the toy-maker.

"Unless what?" said Ehu.

But instead of replying, Ezra, who had evidently been racking his brains to remember something all the time he was making these absurd remarks, suddenly threw his wig in the air and began to dance about, crying:

"Ehu! you are saved, ho! ho! Ehu! you needn't go to prison after all, ho! ho! Ehu! unless I'm very much mistaken, I've got a Krakatuk here in the house all the time, ho! ho! ho!"

And upon this, without giving any other explanation to his bewildered brother, Ezra flew upstairs and came back a moment later carrying a curious little box, which he handed to Ehu.

Ehu opened it slowly, his fingers trembling with excitement.

Inside it was a large golden nut.

The Craftsman had never even dared to hope for such a welcome surprise, much less had he expected it. He took the nut between his finger and thumb gingerly, and turned it this way and that, examining it with the greatest attention. Then, after a lengthy scrutiny, he declared that he entirely concurred with his brother's opinion, and that, in fact, he would be very much surprised indeed if the nut did not turn out to be a genuine Krakatuk. Then he handed it to the Astronomer and asked him his opinion.

Dappleblock's friend examined the nut as carefully as Ehu had done, and then, shaking

his head, he remarked:

“I should have agreed with you and your brother if the nut hadn’t been golden; but the stars never said anything about it being of that colour. Moreover, how did your brother come by a genuine Krakatuk?”

“I will tell you all about it,” said Ezra, “and how it came into my hands and how it acquired that golden coat which puzzles you so much and which certainly isn’t natural to it.”

Then, bidding them sit down and make themselves comfortable (for he very wisely thought that after travelling continuously for fourteen years and nine months the travellers must be rather tired) he began as follows:

“On the very day that the King sent for you under the pretext of decorating you with a cross, a stranger arrived at Berylia carrying a bag of nuts which he had for sale. But the nut-sellers of the town, who naturally wished to retain among themselves the privilege of

selling nuts in Berylia, picked a quarrel with him right in front of the door of my shop. Thereupon the stranger, in order to defend himself more easily, put down his bag of nuts and began to retaliate vigorously, to the great delight of the small boys and commissionaires who had collected, when suddenly a heavily-laden wagon came along and passed right over the bag of nuts. On seeing this accident the nut-sellers, who looked upon it as the judgment of heaven, considered themselves sufficiently revenged; so they ceased molesting the stranger and went away. The stranger picked up his bag and found that all the nuts had been broken except one, which he presented to me with a curious smile.

"You can have it," said he, "for a new penny dated 1820."

"And," he continued, "a day would come when I should not regret my purchase, though it seemed to be a poor bargain at the moment.

"So I rummaged in my pockets to see if I

had got a coin that was something like the one he demanded, and was surprised to find, in the top pocket of my waistcoat, a new penny of the exact date which he mentioned. How it came there I haven't the least idea; but it seemed to me such an extraordinary coincidence that I handed it to him at once. He gave me the nut in exchange, and disappeared.

"I put the nut in my shop window, but although I asked for it only the price which it had cost me, plus ten shillings, it remained there for seven or eight years without anyone showing the slightest inclination to buy it. So then I gave it a coat of gold paint, to make it look more valuable; but this only cost me twopence more, for the nut is still without a purchaser."

At this moment the Astronomer, who had been holding the nut in his hands all the time Ezra was speaking, uttered a cry of joy. Whilst Ehu Dappleblock had been listening to

his brother's story, the Astronomer, with the aid of a pocket-knife, had carefully scratched the gilding on the nut, and, at one end of it he had discovered, engraved in Chinese letters, the word

KRAKATUK

At this all uncertainty vanished, and the identity of the nut was established beyond doubt.

CHAPTER VIII.

How, having discovered the nut Krakatuk, Dappleblock and the Astronomer found the young man who could crack it.

Ehu Dappleblock was so anxious to announce the good news to the King that he wanted to take the mail-coach and return to the capital at once; but Ezra pressed him to wait until his son Nikky came in. Ehu yielded the more willingly to this request as he had not seen his nephew for nearly fifteen years. He remembered that when he left Berylia the lad had been a jolly little fellow three and a half years of age, whom Ezra loved with all his heart.

At this moment a handsome young man of eighteen or nineteen entered the shop and approached Ezra, addressing him as "father."

Ezra embraced him fondly; then pointing

to Ehu he said:

“Now go and kiss your Uncle.”

The young man hesitated. Uncle Ehu, with his tattered overcoat, his bald head, and his eye-patch, was not a particularly attractive person. But seeing his hesitation, and fearing that Ehu might be offended, his father gave him a shove so that he was forced to embrace Ehu willy-nilly.

During this scene the Astronomer never took his eyes off the young man, and his stare seemed so rude and peculiar that the youth took the earliest pretext to go out; for he thought it was very ill-mannered of the Astronomer to stare at him like this.

As soon as Nikky had gone the Astronomer questioned Ezra about his son, asking him about a good many family matters. To Ehu's annoyance Ezra insisted upon answering every question at great length, going into the most intimate family details. Ehu thought this was quite unnecessary. He cleared his throat

several times and once or twice nudged the Astronomer in the ribs with his elbow ; but his friend was so interested that he paid not the slightest attention to these demonstrations.

Presently the talk took a turn which showed Ehu that his friend's interest was due to something more than mere idle curiosity. Nikky was, they learnt (as, indeed, his figure indicated) eighteen years of age. When he was quite a child he was such a jolly and pretty little fellow that his mother used to delight in dressing him up like the dolls in the shop window. Sometimes she would clothe him like a student, sometimes as a postillion, sometimes like a Hungarian. But one part of his dress was always the same, for his mother took care to choose only those costumes that required top-boots. For although Nikky possessed the prettiest little feet in the world, his calves were very thin, and top-boots not only hid this defect but suited his slim figure.

"And so," said the Astronomer, "your son has never worn anything but top-boots?"

(Ehu's eyes began to bulge).

"That is so," said the toy-maker; "Nikky has never worn anything but top-boots." Then he continued: "When he was ten I sent him to the University at Padua, where he remained until he was eighteen without contracting any of the evil habits of his fellow students: he was never greedy, he always shut the door after him, and he never bit his nails. The only weakness which he has ever had is that he will persist in allowing those four or five straggling hairs to grow on his chin; for he would never allow a barber to touch his face."

"And so," said the Astronomer, "your son has never been shaved?"

(Ehu's eyes opened wider and wider).

"Never," replied Ezra.

"And during the vacations," continued the Astronomer, "how did he pass his time?"

"He remained in the shop, wearing his

pretty little student costume," said the father ;
"and, from pure lightness of heart, he used
to amuse himself by cracking nuts for the
girls and boys who came to buy toys. In fact
everyone called him 'The Nutcracker.'"

"The Nutcracker?" cried Ehu.

"The Nutcracker?" cried the Astronomer.
Then they stared at one another, and Ezra
stared at them.

"My dear sir," said the Astronomer to Ezra,
"I have an idea that your fortune is made."

The toy-maker naturally was not unmoved
by this prognostication ; but he wanted to
know more. The Astronomer, however, say-
ing that they were both very tired, insisted
upon putting off the explanation until the
following day.

As soon as Ehu and the Astronomer reached
their bedroom the star-gazer threw himself
upon his companion's neck.

"It is he," he cried. "We have him at
last."

"Do you really think so?" asked Dapple-block, in the tone of a man who doubts but really wants to be convinced.

"Do I really think so!" echoed the Astronomer. "Why, he possesses all the necessary qualifications, doesn't he?"

"Let's go over them again," said Ehu.

"Right," said the Astronomer. "To begin with, he has always worn top-boots."

"That's so."

"He has never been shaved."

"True."

"Lastly, from sheer love of the thing, he stays in his father's shop to crack nuts for little girls, who all call him 'The Nutcracker.'"

"That is certainly so."

"My dear Ehu, good fortunes never come singly. But if you are still in doubt, let us consult the stars."

They went up to the top of the house, opened the box-room door, and climbed through the trap-door on to the roof. Then,

having cast the young man's horoscope, they saw that he was destined to a great fortune. This prediction, which confirmed all the Astronomer's hopes, removed Ehu's remaining doubts.

"And now," said the Astronomer, triumphantly, "there are only two things which we must not forget to do."

"What are they?" asked Ehu.

"First of all, you must make a strong wooden contrivance which will fit round your nephew's neck and enable him to double the pressure of his jaws."

"Nothing easier," replied Dappleblock; "it is the A. B. C. of hydrodynamics."

"Secondly," continued the Astronomer, "when we arrive at the palace we must carefully conceal the fact that we have brought the Krakatuk and the Nutcracker with us. For I have an idea that the more teeth that are broken and the more jaws that are dislocated in the attempt to crack the Krakatuk, the

greater will be the reward which the King will offer to whoever shall succeed where others have failed."

"My dear fellow," said Ehu, "your foresight is little short of marvellous. Now let's go to bed."

So saying, they came down from the roof, and having regained their room, the travellers went to bed. Pulling their night-caps over their ears, they slept more soundly than they had done for fourteen years and nine months.

But before he got into bed Ehu quietly went out on to the landing and removed the young man's boots from the mat in front of his door.

CHAPTER IX.

What happened at Court when the King
tried to find a nutcracker.

Next morning at breakfast the two friends told Ezra the plans they had formed the night before. Ezra was not lacking in ambition, and in spite of his natural doubt in his son's capabilities, he flattered himself that Nikky possessed the strongest jaws in the country. So he welcomed with enthusiasm the proposal which would rid his shop both of the nut and the nutcracker.

Nikky, however, was not so easily persuaded. The contrivance which Ehu wanted to fit round his neck in place of his handsome lace collar made him feel very uneasy. However, the Astronomer, his uncle, and his father, all made him such magnificent promises that

he yielded at last.

Accordingly Ehu set to work at once. The appliance was soon finished and was screwed firmly to the Nutcracker's neck. Lest you should have any doubts concerning the wisdom of this proceeding, I may say at once that the ingenious contrivance succeeded perfectly. From the very first day the most brilliant results were obtained, the young man cracking the very hardest apricot stones and toughest possible peach stones with hardly any effort at all.

These experiments completed, the Astronomer, the Craftsman, and the Nutcracker set out immediately for the palace. Ezra wanted to accompany them; but as someone had to stay behind to look after the shop, he was obliged to forego the pleasure and remained at Berylia.

The first care of Ehu and the Astronomer when they reached the capital was to leave Nikky at their hotel and go and announce their

arrival at the palace. They intended to inform the King that they had at last found the nut which they had sought in vain for so many years in all the five quarters of the globe. But about the Nutcracker they were determined not to say a word.

Their news spread joy throughout the palace. The King sent at once for the Reader of the Public Thoughts. This official, who was one of his most intimate counsellors, had control of all the newspapers, and the King commanded him to draw up in a few words an official notice for the Gazette. This announcement, which the editors of all the other papers would be obliged to copy under pain of being suppressed immediately, declared that any man who believed his teeth were strong enough to crack the nut Krakatuk had only to present himself at the palace, when, if successful, he would be handsomely rewarded.

It is only cases like this which reveal the strength of a nation's teeth. The competitors

were so numerous that it was found necessary to set up a jury, presided over by the Royal Dentist, to examine them, in order to see if they all possessed their complete set of thirty-two teeth, and if any of their teeth had been stopped.

Three thousand five hundred candidates presented themselves for this preliminary examination, which lasted eight days. The only result was that many hundreds of teeth were shed and a number of jaws dislocated. The Royal Dentist made copious notes, and took a large number of names and addresses.

A second appeal was therefore necessary. The provincial and foreign newspapers printed it with big headlines. The King even offered the post of Perpetual President of the Academy and the Grand Cross of the Order of the Mushroom to whoever should produce a pair of jaws strong enough to break the Krakatuk. Even uneducated people were allowed to compete.

This second trial furnished five thousand and two competitors. All the learned societies of Europe sent their representatives to this important congress. There were several members of the Royal Society, including the perpetual secretary of that august body. But he himself was unable to compete, as he had no teeth left, having broken them all in attempting to digest the works of his fellow members.

The second trial lasted fifteen days, and was, unfortunately, even more disastrous than the first. The delegates of the learned societies insisted, for the honour of their associations, in attempting to crack the nut; but they only succeeded in leaving their best teeth behind them. The Royal Dentist filled up a large number of address books, and made numerous appointments.

As for the nut, its shell bore not the slightest sign of the efforts that had been made to crack it.

The King was in despair. He determined to make a last desperate attempt; and as he had no male heir, he ordered a third announcement to be made in all the newspapers at home and abroad, promising the hand of the Princess Pirlipatine and the succession to the throne to whoever should succeed in cracking the nut Krakatuk. The only condition was that this time the competitors should be between sixteen and twenty-four years of age.

This magnificent offer quickly spread throughout all Europe. Competitors began to arrive from the most remote parts. Many started to come even from Asia, Africa, and America, as well as from that fifth quarter of the globe which had been discovered by Dappleblock and the Astronomer. But they realised sooner or later that the competition would have started, or even finished by the time that the advertisement reached them, so they turned back and went home again.

Ehu and the Astronomer agreed that the

moment had now come for them to produce the Nutcracker. It was impossible for the King to offer a richer reward, and it was a good deal more than he had ever offered anybody before. And so, confident of success, although a host of Princes with regal and even imperial jaws were presenting themselves as candidates, Ehu took his place at the end of the queue outside the ticket office. Thus the name of Ehu Dappleblock was absolutely the last on the list: his ticket bore the number 11,375.

This final competition proceeded just like the former ones; Ehu's 11,374 predecessors were all put hors de combat one after the other. And on the nineteenth day of the contest, at precisely half past eleven o'clock in the morning, just in fact as the Princess attained her fifteenth year, Ehu Dappleblock's name was called out.

The Nutcracker stepped forward between Ehu and the Astronomer.

CHAPTER X.

How Nikky cracked the nut, and what
happened to him in doing it.

It was the first time that the two friends had seen the Princess since she had left her cradle, and she had changed a good deal. But it was certainly not for the better. When they had last seen her she was rather alarming, but now her likeness to a mouse was really extraordinary. In fact the Murr family (who, you will remember, were really responsible for the whole trouble) became quite uneasy whenever she entered the room. She had grown much larger, and her diet of bacon-fat and nuts had made her quite stout. Also she never went anywhere without filling her pockets with nuts, and she nibbled one when-

ever she was not talking or sleeping. In fact she always put a nut in her hand last thing at night before she went to sleep, so that she could begin to nibble as soon as ever she woke up. She was passionately devoted to cheese, and preferred it toasted. Meat she had never tasted.

At the sight of Pirlipatine the poor Nutcracker nearly fainted. He turned anxiously to his uncle and asked him if he were *quite* sure that the Krakatuk would make her beautiful again. It was all very well for Ehu and the Astronomer, he said, but if the Princess were to remain as she was at present, although he would certainly make an honest attempt to crack the nut if only for the glory of succeeding where so many had failed, he would be quite willing to forego the honour of marrying her. In fact he would be quite content to resign her father's throne to whoever would like it.

Needless to say Ehu and the Astronomer

reassured him vigorously, telling him that when once the nut had been cracked and the kernel eaten, Pirlipatine would instantly become the most beautiful girl in the world.

But if the sight of Pirlipatine had chilled the heart of the poor Nutcracker, his appearance had caused a very different sensation in the breast of the Princess. As soon as ever she saw him, she cried out impulsively:

“Oh, I do hope he'll be able to crack the nut.”

At this the Princess' governess immediately replied:

“I must point out to your highness that it is neither usual nor becoming for a young lady in your station in life to voice her opinion upon such matters aloud.”

As a matter of fact Nikky really was enough to turn the head of any Princess. He had a little short cloak of purple velvet trimmed with golden fur, and under this a tight fitting coat of orange brocade, with green enamelled

buttons, and knickerbockers to match. His little top-boots were the daintiest you ever saw, and they were so highly polished that you could see your face in them. The only thing that tended to spoil his appearance was the wooden contrivance that Ehu had made to assist his jaws in their task. But his father had taken the precaution to give him a high stiff lace collar, which came up to his cheeks and completely hid the apparatus. In fact this collar attracted quite a lot of attention; and many of the discomfited Princes adopted it on the spot to hide the swollen faces which their dislocated jaws occasioned.

And so when this handsome young man stepped forward, there was not one of the servants or dentist's assistants who did not echo the Princess' wish in his heart, and remark to himself that there was no one in the whole kingdom, not even the King and Queen, whom they would rather see accomplish the task of cracking the nut.

As for the Nutcracker, he stepped forward with an air of confidence which redoubled the hopes that all reposed in him. As soon as he reached the royal platform he bowed to the King and Queen, then to the Princess, then to the dentist's assistants. Then he turned to the Master of the Ceremonies, who advanced and offered him the nut Krakatuk. Nikky took it delicately between his finger and thumb like a conjurer, placed it between his teeth, gave the wooden contrivance under his chin a sharp blow with his fist, and

CRICK-CRACK!

the nutshell was broken in several pieces.

Quickly tearing off the husk, he presented the kernel to the Princess, making her a bow that was both graceful and respectful. Then, remembering Ehu's instructions, he shut his eyes and began to step backwards.

At the same instant the Princess swallowed the kernel. Then

WONDER OF WONDERS!



Her head began to shrink, her whiskers shrivelled up, her ears became smaller and rounder, her nose went back and back, the hair disappeared from her face, her eyes changed from brown to blue, and in almost less time than it takes to tell you, the Princess Pirlipatine had become a young girl of exquisite beauty.

Her skin was now soft as a rose petal and smooth as the finest velvet, her eyelashes were silken and dark, her eyes blue as the sky on a summer's day, her golden ringlets fell in thick clusters about her shoulders, her little mouth was small and cherry red, her nose straight and exquisitely chiselled. She was the most beautiful Princess that had ever been seen.

For an instant there was silence, then everybody began to talk at once at the top of their voices. Trumpets sounded, cymbals and drums were banged as loudly as possible, shouts of joy were heard throughout the whole city, mingled with a hubbub of bell-ringing

and cheering. The brass band which was stationed close to the palace in case anyone succeeded in cracking the nut, came hurriedly out of the inn and started playing several tunes at once. The King, the Ministers, the Councillors and the Judges began to dance about on one leg, just as they had done when Pirlipatine was born. The Queen fainted with joy, and they were obliged to sponge her face freely with Eau de Cologne before she came to.

The Nutcracker was rather upset by all this noise. He had not yet completed his task, for he still had to perform his seven steps backwards. Nevertheless he began with a self-possession which augured well for the time when he would assume the crown.

He had already poised his leg carefully for the seventh step, when, all of a sudden, Dame Mousekin appeared through a crack in the floor! Squeaking dreadfully she darted forward between Nikky's legs. The future heir to the throne was just putting his foot to the

ground, in fact the seventh step was almost accomplished, when he trod heavily upon her.

In an instant he stumbled so that he almost fell.

O cruel fate! In less time than it takes to relate the handsome young man had assumed the very deformity from which he had just helped the Princess to recover! His legs grew suddenly thin, his body became fatter and fatter, his nose got longer and longer, and in a moment he was like a mouse!

CHAPTER XI.

What happened at the Court afterwards.

The cause of this disaster did not escape scot-free. Dame Mousekin lay writhing in pain on the floor. Her wickedness had not gone unpunished. The Nutcracker had trodden upon her so firmly with the heel of his boot that she was mortally wounded. In her pain the mouse-queen now cried out with all her might:

“Krakatuk! Krakatuk! Nut so hard,
Why have you brought me this fate ill-
starred?

Only my son can avenge me now;
Nutcracker, thee with my shape I endow!

Hi! Hi! Hi!

Pi! Pi! Pi!

Goodbye life,
Full of strife!

Farewell sky,
Blue and high.
Adieu the earth,
With its mirth.
Oh! I die
Hi! Hi! Hi!
Ah!!!”

When it was obvious to all that Dame Mousekin had breathed her last, the Lord Great Scavenger was sent for. He took up Dame Mousekin gingerly by the tail and carried her out, promising to bury her beside the remains of her family, who, fifteen years and some months previously, had been interred in a common grave.

In the midst of all the noise and rejoicings that were going on, no one except Ehu and the Astronomer paid the slightest attention to poor Nikky. The Princess, unaware of what had happened, commanded that the young hero should be led before her; for, in spite of the reprimand of her governess, she was anxious to thank him at once. But she no sooner caught sight of Nikky than she buried

her face in her hands, and, forgetting the great service which he had rendered her, cried out:

“Go away, go away, horrible Nutcracker! Take him away, take him away, take him away!”

Instantly, the Grand Usher of the palace stepped forward. Seizing poor Nikky by the shoulders he pushed him hastily towards the staircase.

Ehu was standing petrified at what had happened, but the Astronomer never lost his head for an instant. Seizing Ehu by the arm he hurried him towards the door. But the King, furious that they had dared to propose a Nutcracker as his son-in-law, ordered them to be seized immediately. The guards surrounded them in an instant; escape was impossible. They were led before the royal platform.

At first the King was minded to behead them there and then. But the Queen tactfully pressed a box of his favourite sweetmeats into

his hand, and urged him not to do anything in a hurry as it always gave him indigestion. Quickly regaining his normal calm, he proceeded to pass sentence upon them. In place of the pension of ten thousand rose-nobles and the gold-rimmed spectacles which he had promised to the one, and in place of the sword studded with diamonds, the Grand Cross of the Order of the Golden Mushroom, and the new yellow overcoat which he had promised to the other, he exiled them forthwith from the kingdom. In fact he gave them only twenty-four hours in which to cross the frontier.

There was nothing more to be said. Ehu, the Astronomer, and Nikky, left the capital immediately after lunch and had crossed the frontier by tea time. But as soon as night had come, the two wise men stopped the cab, and climbing on to the roof of it, consulted the stars once more. There they read that, in spite of his transformation, the Nutcracker

was destined to become a Prince and a King (provided he did not prefer to remain an ordinary private person, for it was left entirely to his choice) and that this would come to pass as soon as his deformity had disappeared. Moreover, the stars clearly showed that his deformity would disappear only when he had defeated, in single combat, the Prince who, after the death of Dame Mousekin and her first seven sons, had ascended the throne as King of the Mice. Lastly, the two diametrically synchronizing correlatives of the horoscope clearly indicated that in order to overcome the Prince he would have to take three bites of the fruit that grows upon the Bangalu tree.

Full of hope for the accomplishment of this brilliant destiny, the three drove on to Berylia. Here they took the precaution to change the Nutcracker's clothes, and Nikky, who had left his father's shop as an only son, entered it again as a Nutcracker.

Needless to say Ezra Dappleblock did not recognise his son, and when he asked his brother Ehu and the Astronomer what had become of Nikky, those two distinguished individuals replied, with the readiness and strict regard for truth which always characterise learned men, that the King and Queen had not wished to part with the Princess' deliverer.

Nikky felt that his position was a difficult one. He uttered not a word, but went to and fro in the shop cracking nuts more vigorously than ever, and waiting patiently for the information as to the whereabouts of the Bangalu tree which Ehu and the Astronomer sought for nightly.

CHAPTER XII.

What happened to the Princess after the
departure of the Nutcracker.

I am sure you will be disappointed at this tragic end to the wanderings of Ehu Dappleblock and the Astronomer, not to mention the lamentable fate which had overtaken pretty little Nikky. But the truth must be told at all costs, no matter how unpleasant it may be. The goal of Ehu and the Astronomer was actually in sight, the rich rewards which the King had promised to them were almost within their grasp, and already they had begun to look forward to a happy and prosperous old age. Now Fate had turned suddenly against them. At one stroke they had lost everything for which they hoped, and were com-

pletely ruined.

But not irrevocably. The stars clearly showed that all might yet be well, provided Nikky could accomplish the tasks that now lay before him. As for the poor Nutcracker, he realised that thrones are not to be gained, nor the hands of Princesses won, by the mere cracking of a nut. But it was no use giving in just because Misfortune had crossed his path. He would have to persevere until success at last crowned his efforts. Meanwhile he went on cracking nuts, sweeping out the shop, and dusting the toys. For Ezra, though he would have hesitated to ask his son to perform these menial tasks, had no hesitation whatever in assigning them to the servant which Ehu had brought with him from foreign parts—for such he supposed Nikky to be.

Ehu and the Astronomer lost no time in searching for the whereabouts of the Bangalu tree. This could only be done at night; and

as, moreover, the stars were now frequently obscured by clouds, some time elapsed before they were able to obtain a successful horoscope.

Nikky also had something else to do besides cracking nuts. As he would have to engage the King of the Mice in deadly combat, it was necessary for him to be thoroughly prepared. Every morning Ehu gave him lessons in fencing, boxing, wrestling, high-kicking, jumping, turning somersaults, and spinning on one toe, not to mention numerous gymnastic exercises to strengthen his limbs. But the days and nights went by, and still the stars refused to show where the Bangalu tree grew.

Meanwhile an event of great importance had taken place at the palace. You will remember that as soon as she had swallowed the kernel of the nut Krakatuk the Princess Pirlipatine had been restored to her former beauty. Nobody troubled in the least about Nikky's fate. He and the Astronomer and

Dappleblock had all been banished from the country; the troubles of the royal house seemed now at an end. The King ordered that pageants and feasts should be held everywhere throughout the kingdom for seven days to celebrate the Princess Pirlipatine's recovery.

The King himself decided to hold a magnificent banquet. As soon as he made up his mind he went to find the Queen and impart the news to her. He found her in the pantry making a light meal off seed-cake and milk.

"My dear," said the King, helping himself to a piece of cake, "my dear, don't you think we ought to give a banquet in honour of Pirlipatine's debut?"

"Certainly, my love," replied the Queen, pouring out a glass of milk for him. "What would you like to have?"

The Queen was a dutiful wife: she knew that questions like this always pleased the King.

“Oh, something quite slight,” said the King nonchalantly, “a purée of liver, a chitterling or two...and perhaps a small black pudding—provided we’ve got enough bacon. We might also have a roast turkey or so, and some meringues and a chocolate blanc-mange...”

“Nothing easier, my love,” replied the Queen. “When shall it be?”

Having settled these important details, the King kissed her tenderly and went off to invite all the Kings and Queens and all the Royal Princes and all the Hereditary Grand Dukes, and all the most agreeable Pretenders, to a magnificent feast in honour of the Princess Pirlipatine’s debut.

The day arrived. The capital was thronged with illustrious visitors. The hotels were so full that some of the Pretenders were obliged to sleep on the billiard tables. The Royal Dentist had never been so busy in all his life. For the visitors were determined that the unfortunate trial of the Krakatuk should in no

wise prevent them from doing full justice to the banquet.

Yet the Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary were strangely troubled, though nobody knew why. Every morning the Princess Pirlipatine appeared punctually at breakfast looking more beautiful than ever. But it was noticed that the Chief - Nurses - Extraordinary always showed the greatest anxiety for her to go to bed in good time. At a quarter to nine every evening they hurried to her side and insisted upon her going to bed immediately. Otherwise, they said, she would lose her beauty sleep. Indeed so anxious were they to prevent this misfortune happening that upon one occasion, when the Princess insisted upon finishing a game of nap which she was playing with the King and the Court Dentist, they nearly fainted, and literally dragged the Princess out of her chair at three minutes to nine. Fortunately the King had been winning all the evening, so he only laughed good-naturedly.

Now the reason for the good nurses' solicitude was this. On the very day that she had resumed her normal shape, tired out with the excitement and noise, the Princess had gone to bed early. It happened that shortly after nine o'clock one of the Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary leant over her bed to see if she was properly covered up; and chancing to stoop down to admire her pretty little face, saw to her horror that the Princess had become once more like a mouse! The Chief Nurse gave a stifled cry, and her companion came running up. Together they examined the sleeping Princess. There was no doubt whatever about it! The Princess Pirlipatine was a mouse once more! Sitting down by her side the Nurses burst into tears.

"Perhaps," said one of them, "she's only like this when she's asleep. Let's wake her and see."

So saying, they held a bottle of smelling salts under the Princess' nose. Pirlipatine

sneezed twice and sat up. Still she was like a mouse! Her sharp little nose twitched once or twice; and then, finding a nut in her bed, she nibbled it and fell asleep again. The Nurses were in despair.

There was nothing more to be done. In the morning they would have to tell the Queen. The Queen would certainly tell the King, and all would be mourning where a few hours before joy and laughter reigned. Moreover the King would almost certainly hold the Nurses responsible for the calamity. Dame Mousekin's son must have climbed on to the foot of the Princess' bed and charmed her whilst they were folding up her clothes. The least they could hope for was perpetual banishment. Overcome by these gloomy forebodings they fell asleep.

Suddenly one of them awoke. The Princess was calling. It was now daylight—in fact the sun was shining brightly in at the windows. Hastily waking her fellow-nurse,

they approached the Princess' bed and asked her what she wanted. Imagine their surprise and joy at finding that the Princess was once more the beautiful girl whom they had put to bed the night before! The Princess was sitting up and impatiently demanding her tea and bread and butter. Muttering excuses the bewildered nurses dashed away to execute the royal command.

It was no nightmare that the Princess' fond guardians had had. Nor was the phenomenon due to Dame Mousekin's son, who at that very moment was fast asleep inside the King's best ermine-lined crown. You will remember that the Nutcracker had stumbled just as he was finishing his task, so that the remedy had never been completed. So it happened that every night, precisely at nine o'clock, the Princess took on her mouselike shape, resuming her normal appearance at sunrise next morning.

Of course the Nurses were unaware of the

cause of this; and, finding that the secret would remain undiscovered so long as the Princess was safely in bed by nine o'clock every evening, they carefully abstained from telling her mother anything about it. But secrets of this nature cannot be kept from a mother for long; they are bound to be discovered sooner or later, and had the nurses told the Queen all about the matter at once, they would have saved a great deal of trouble.

CHAPTER XIII.

The King sends for Dappleblock again.

At precisely ten minutes to seven the guests began to arrive. As on a former occasion, the King himself welcomed them on the front door-step. This time there were many more visitors, for the King, having sold at considerable profit all the black-puddings, chitterlings, and sausages which did not contain enough bacon to please him, was now very well off indeed. At the first stroke of seven o'clock the Grand Usher began to sound the great gong in the hall, and the King, giving his arm to the Queen, led the way into the dining-room.

Here was a magnificent sight. The table was covered with gold candelabra and dishes



loaded high with apples, oranges, almonds, and rare fruits; a large melon stood by itself on a superb dish in the centre; sweetmeats were before every guest's place; and the rich damask tablecloth was thickly strewn with silken crackers. Some of the Pretenders were quite dazzled with the sight, and could only repeat in a low tone just loud enough for the King to hear: "What magnificence! What superb grandeur!" The only thing that was lacking were nuts; for the Queen, being a tactful woman, thought that their presence might prove a source of embarrassment to the guests.

"For what we are about to receive," said the King reverently, and when he had finished grace they all sat down.

The dinner proceeded. It was a complete success. The purée was creamy and delicious; the black-puddings and chitterlings contained sufficient bacon to satisfy the most exacting epicure; whilst the turkey was

stuffed so tight that it seemed to be really on the point of bursting. As for the meringues and chocolate blanc-mange, they simply melted in the guests' mouths.

At last came the dessert. Everyone was happy and smiling, and the King, carried away by his feelings and the success which the Queen and the Superintendent of the Royal Kitchens had achieved, beckoned to the Grand Butler and ordered up a bottle of the Imperial Tokay. Hardly had he done so when, with many curtseys, the two Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary entered and approached the Princess. It was a quarter to nine! But this time the King, who had dined splendidly off his favourite dishes, was seriously annoyed with the Nurses. He would not hear of the Princess leaving the table before dinner was over. Moreover her health had not yet been drunk by the assembled company. Furthermore, he announced to the Queen, in no uncertain way, that in future Pirlipatine should sit up until

ten o'clock every night, and that this new regulation should come into force that very evening.

In vain the Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary pleaded. They threw themselves on their knees and with tears besought the Queen to intercede on their behalf. They even hinted that unless the Princess went to bed immediately something terrible might happen. The Queen, touched by their appeal, was about to address the King, when

DING, DONG!

The great clock on the mantelpiece began to strike nine!

Suddenly there was silence. Everyone had stopped talking and was staring at the Princess. For even before the clock had finished striking, she had begun to change. Her eyes grew larger and rounder, her nose grew longer and longer, her ears became pointed, fur appeared all over her face, and in a moment she had become a mouse!

The Queen fainted immediately. The King turned white as the tablecloth; numerous Empresses, Dowager Queens, and Hereditary Royal Duchesses collapsed on the spot. The only one who retained self-possession was Pirlipatine, whose little brown hands were darting hither and thither among the sweetmeats and crackers in her endeavour to find a nut. But the two Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary were brave and capable women. Quickly they reached the Princess' chair and carried her off to bed between them, in spite of her squeaks.

The rest of the dinner, of course, was completely spoilt. The Queen and most of the Empresses and Dowager Queens and Hereditary Grand Duchesses were removed by the attendants, and the King rose as soon as he had finished his coffee. The guests all made excuses to leave early, and within half-an-hour the palace was practically empty. I say "practically," because some of the agree-

able Pretenders, who had come to the palace solely to enjoy the banquet and didn't really care in the least about Pirlipatine, returned to the dining-room as soon as they could, and proved that their visits to the Court Dentist had not been in vain.

The King's first impulse was to send for Ehu Dappleblock and the Astronomer and behead them there and then. But on second thoughts he realised that even if he found out where they had gone to there was little likelihood of their obeying his command. So he went to the Queen's room instead, to talk things over with her, merely telling the Grand Usher to see that neither of the Chief - Nurses - Extraordinary left the palace.

The Queen had recovered somewhat and was sitting up on the sofa. The Court Physician had given her a wineglassful of sal volatile, and she felt much calmer. The King sat down beside her and took one of her hands in his. Together they talked the whole

matter over.

Then the Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary were sent for. With fear and trembling they related how the Princess had suddenly changed into a mouse again at nine o'clock on the very evening of her restoration by the Nutcracker, how she had resumed her normal appearance next morning at sunrise, and how this changing from one to the other had gone on every evening and every morning since then.

At this the King and Queen both brightened up very much.

"It's only half as bad as we thought," said the King.

"And only at night," added the Queen.

But the King could not overlook the crime which the Nurses had committed in hiding the truth and thus exposing him to so great an affront before all his royal guests. He sentenced them both to perpetual exile on the spot. But as the Queen pointed out that there was no one else who could look after the

Princess properly just at present, he granted them a permanent respite.

"We must find Ehu Dappleblock at once," said the Queen.

"Do you think he would come if I sent for him?" asked the King.

"He *must* come," replied the Queen. "At least he has cured Pirlipatine by day, and he may be able to cure her by night. But I'm afraid, my dear, that you offended him by exiling him so tersely."

"Well, well," said the King, "he needn't have taken offence at a little thing like that. I *had* thought of having his head cut off at once. However, I suppose we'd better advertise for him in all the papers."

Next day an announcement appeared in the newspapers to the effect that if Ehu Dappleblock would send his address to a leading firm of lawyers in the capital, he would hear of something to his advantage.

Ehu saw the advertisement. Before

answering it he consulted the Astronomer, and together they consulted the stars. There they read that great good fortune was in store for both of them. Accordingly Ehu, who remarked to his friend that even if it were a ruse the King couldn't come and fetch him at Berylia, wrote to the address given, enclosing a stamped and addressed envelope for reply.

CHAPTER XIV.

Ehu and the Astronomer discover the whereabouts of the Bangalu tree.

The King was overjoyed when the Lord Great Detective-Extraordinary brought him Ehu's address. Acting upon the Queen's advice he sat down immediately and wrote a kind letter to the Craftsman, telling him exactly what had happened, and asking him if he would be so kind as to take immediate steps to complete the Princess' cure. He even invited Ehu and his friend the Astronomer to come and stay at the palace ("we can always put them up somewhere for a night or two, my dear," he remarked to the Queen), promising them protection against everybody, and ended up by saying that the pension of a

thousand rose-nobles, the gold-rimmed spectacles, the sword studded with diamonds, the Order of the Golden Mushroom, and the new overcoat, still awaited them. He even began "Dear Mr. Dappleblock," and ended up "always yours sincerely."

Ehu and the Astronomer read the letter through several times and even tested it for invisible ink, but could find nothing wrong with it. The stars clearly showed that no evil awaited them; but that, on the contrary, their visit to the capital would bring them nothing but good fortune.

Fortified with these hopes they set out by the mail-coach that evening, taking Nikky with them.

Arrived at the capital, they left Nikky at their hotel and made their way to the palace. The King was delighted to see them. He shook hands warmly with them and told Ehu that he was positively anxious for the Craftsman to win the new overcoat. Indeed Ehu

was now really in need of a new one; for although his old yellow overcoat had been patched and repaired by the best tailor in Berylia, it still showed unmistakable signs of wear, and the patches were very much brighter than the rest of it. So Ehu thanked the King for his kindness, and replied that it would not be his fault if the Princess were not cured completely this time.

Then he went on to tell the King about Nikky's transformation; and the King, who was really a very tender-hearted man, blew his nose violently several times. But when Ehu had finished, the King remarked that although nothing would please him more than that the Nutcracker should slay the King of the Mice and recover his normal shape, yet the horoscope which announced these things said nothing about the Princess. The Astronomer, however, assured the King that when once the King of the Mice were dead there would be no one else to cast spells (for

the stars clearly showed that His Majesty was a widower with no children), and that the Princess would assuredly be rid of her troublesome ailment as soon as ever that happy event had come to pass.

There was only one thing to be done. The Bangalu tree must be discovered at all costs.

The King sent at once for the Reader of the Public Thoughts and commanded that the very next day a notice should appear in all the newspapers, both at home and abroad, announcing that anyone who possessed or knew of a genuine Bangalu tree should write and tell the King immediately, and that a magnificent reward would be given.

The announcement attracted great attention ; and two days later letters began to arrive from farmers, fruit-growers, nurserymen, and timber-merchants, all over Europe, as well as from several thousand private persons, offering genuine Bangalu trees at prices varying from seven and sixpence to ten guineas. Ehu and

the Astronomer read them all through carefully, but not a single one described the tree indicated by the stars.

On the fifth day, tired out and their fingers sore with opening envelopes, they were going upstairs to bed when the Astronomer, looking out of the landing window, saw that it was a fine night for taking horoscopes. Accordingly they made their way to the roof of the palace. At first Ehu could not see very clearly, for he had inadvertently placed the telescope to his glass eye. But at length, written plainly in the stars, they saw that the Bangalu tree would be found only on the lower slopes of the Himalayan mountains. Moreover the spot indicated was the very one where the travellers had sat down and taken the resolution to begin their return journey!

Transported with joy, Ehu wanted to go downstairs and tell the King at once; but the Astronomer restrained him.

“My dear Ehu,” he said, “after all our

exertions we are entitled to something better than a paltry pension and a new overcoat. The King is a generous man and will appreciate the difficulties of our search. Let *me* speak to him in the morning."

Ehu gladly agreed, and, regaining their room, the friends went to bed and slept soundly.

Next morning Dappleblock and the Astronomer had an interview with the King; and when Ehu hinted that the fruit of the Bangalu tree might possibly be effective—so far as the Princess was concerned—only if Nikky were her affianced husband, the King generously promised to carry out his former intention. At the Astronomer's suggestion he agreed to draw up a deed assigning the throne after his death to the Princess' husband, and promised faithfully that she should marry the Nutcracker as soon as ever he succeeded in curing her completely and in effecting his own transformation. Moreover he agreed to re-

instate the Astronomer in his former post, to assign him a suite of rooms rent free in the palace, to increase his pension to five thousand rose-nobles, and to allow him coal from the royal coal-cellars free of charge. As for Ehu, he should be appointed Craftsman-Extraordinary under the Great Seal, he should have a pension similar to the Astronomer's, and should have all the King's cast-off overcoats.

Satisfied with these concessions, the two friends returned joyfully to their hotel, and made arrangements for their journey. As for Nikky, he was overjoyed at the news. The people in the hotel stared at him so much that he felt quite uncomfortable; and, moreover, there was a considerable shortage of nuts in the capital just then.

CHAPTER XV.

How Ehu, the Astronomer, and Nikky gathered
the fruit of the Bangalu tree.

I will not weary you by recounting all the adventures that befell the travellers on their journey to Ishkashim, nor by describing their long and toilsome search for the narrow path into the heart of the Himalayas which Ehu and the Astronomer had discovered on their former journey. Suffice it to say that on the evening of the one hundred and forty-fifth day after they had left the capital, the Astronomer stumbled by chance upon the very path for which they were seeking. They had followed the same route from Europe as Ehu and the Astronomer had taken on the return from their former quest, but they had taken longer to

accomplish it, partly because there was no hurry, and partly because Nikky's boots were not very comfortable.

Now at last their goal was, if not in sight, at least within easy reach; and after a rapid march of ten days, during which Nikky was often obliged to run in order to keep up with his companions, they turned a corner suddenly, and there, right in front of them, stood the Bangalu tree! Eagerly they ran towards it.

Imagine their dismay on finding that there was not a single fruit upon it!

They walked round it, patted its trunk, and Nikky even climbed up into it; but not a fruit was to be seen. There was not even a bud upon it. Sorrowfully they sat down at its foot, and, overcome by fatigue and their feelings, burst into tears.

While they were sitting thus, Nikky espied a man approaching. As first Ehu and the Astronomer were rather alarmed; for they had

imagined that the district they were in was quite uninhabited. So they made friendly signs, and when the newcomer approached, the Astronomer, who was a great linguist and spoke Himalayan fluently, bid him good-afternoon. To their delight they discovered that the stranger was no less a person than the Wise Man of the Chinchinunga Tribe, and that he knew all about the Bangalu tree. But their joy changed to sorrow again when they learnt that the Chinchinungas had gathered all the fruit and had made it into jam only a fortnight before, and that the tree bore fruit only once in every seven years!

"Is there no other Bangalu tree?" asked the Astronomer, in pure Himalayan.

"Yes," replied the Wise Man; "there is one and one only. It grows on the other side of the mountain, precisely opposite this one. But this is also its year of fruit, and the Pinchinunga tribe, like us, always make its fruit into jam. I heard recently, however,

that they had had an accident with their stew-pan, so it is just possible that they have not yet plucked all the fruit."

At these words the Astronomer wanted to start for the other side of the mountain there and then. But Nikky was tired out; moreover he had blistered one of his heels. So reluctantly they were obliged to postpone their departure until the following day, and the Astronomer invited the Wise Man of the Chinchinjungas to supper.

At dawn the next morning the travellers resumed their journey. The road became narrower and narrower, and after travelling for some hours they came to a place where they were obliged to go in single file. On one side the mountain rose straight up from the path, and on the other side was a sheer precipice of ten thousand feet.

They had progressed like this for some distance when suddenly, upon turning a corner, they saw an enormous tiger stretched

right across their path! To pass by was impossible; and Ehu thought it would be most imprudent to attempt to step over the sleeping beast. There was no way round, and unless they proceeded at once they would lose their last hope of obtaining the fruit of the Bangalu tree for seven years! They stepped back round the corner on tip-toe and, bidding Nikky stand there in order to warn them if the tiger suddenly appeared round the bend, they retired for some distance to discuss what was to be done.

At first it seemed hopeless. They could think of no plan which would rid their path of the tiger without danger to at least one of them, and the Astronomer had realised at once that both Ehu and Nikky were indispensable to his attainment of the promised reward. As for Ehu, he could not bear to part with his friend. Besides, the Astronomer had all the charts and navigating instruments in his pockets, without which they could not possibly

find their way. Despondently the Astronomer opened his snuff-box and took a big pinch of snuff. At this an idea suddenly struck Ehu.

“O marvellous inventiveness of human understanding,” he cried; “it is thy fertile originations which shall enable us to triumph over even the most infortuitous concatenation of circumstances.”

At first the Astronomer thought his friend was afflicted with sunstroke. He opened his green umbrella at once and held it sympathetically over Ehu’s head. But Dapple-block hastened to expound his plan.

Quietly they approached the corner where Nikky sat nibbling a large nut, and then, having taken off his boots and with a large square tin of his favourite snuff (without which the Astronomer never went anywhere) in his hand, the Astronomer approached the sleeping tiger on tip-toe. Twice he hesitated, but as Ehu called to him in a loud whisper to go on, he went up to the tiger and softly

sprinkled snuff all round it. Then he withdrew quickly and joined Ehu round the corner.

When the Astronomer had recovered his breath and had got his boots on again, Ehu took up a stone and threw it at the tiger. After several attempts he hit the beast with a pebble right on the nose.

With a roar that made the travellers step back hastily, the tiger sprang to its feet amid clouds of snuff. Then slowly it raised its head, and....A-TISH-OO! Again and again it sneezed, each time raising more clouds of snuff. At last, its eyes streaming with tears, its head reeling with sneezes, the huge beast rose up on its hind legs, and with one tremendous

A - A - CHOO ! ! !

blew itself right over the precipice.

It was an awe-inspiring sight.

The travellers were now able to continue their journey in safety; and by nightfall the next evening they espied, from a neighbouring



peak, the second Bangalu tree growing at the foot of the mountain.

It was covered with golden fruit!

Joyfully they sank down on the grass beneath a large nut-tree, tired out but happier than they had been for many a day.

To describe how they reached the tree next morning, how the Astronomer carefully packed the fruit in the special air-tight boxes which he had brought with him, how just as he had finished they saw the savage Pinchinjungas coming with a huge stew-pan to make the fruit into jam, and how they managed to escape in the opposite direction, Ehu having his left ear transfixes by an arrow as they ran, would be to weary you. Suffice it to say that after many hardships and dangers the travellers at length reached Baghdad. From Baghdad they journeyed to Alexandria; at Alexandria they embarked for Venice; from Venice they reached the Alps; and from the Alps they descended into the kingdom of

Pirlipatine's father, hoping this time that, even if he were dead, he would at least have signed the deed appointing Nikky his successor to the throne.

CHAPTER XVI.

Of the preparations which Ehu and the
Astronomer made for Nikky's combat
with the Mouse King.

Leaving Nikky at their hotel, the travellers made their way to the palace. The King was overjoyed to see them, and this time he recognised them at once. After having enquired about Ehu's left ear, he folded them each to his bosom in turn, and insisted upon them staying to supper. Then when Ehu had related their adventures and the success which had crowned their efforts, the King told them that events of no small importance had happened at the palace during their absence.

Shortly after they had left the capital on their search for the Bangalu tree, a fresh calamity had overtaken the Princess Pirlipa-

tine. It happened that one night the Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary were awakened by hearing the Princess cry out. Rushing up to her bed, they were horrified to see a large mouse, gorgeously dressed and with red top-boots, standing by her side. Shaking his paw at the Princess, he cried out in a shrill voice:

“Though Princess proud, you spurn me
now,
Your love I'll gain at last;
Queen of the Mouse Tribe you shall be,
Ere many moons are past.”

Then, before the Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary could recover from their amazement, he darted away and disappeared. There was no doubt whatever about it: it was the King of the Mice.

All efforts to find him had been without avail. The chinks in the floor had all been stopped up, large mouse-traps baited with freshly toasted cheese, bacon fat, and sweet-smelling nuts, had been hastily constructed

and put in the most likely spots; but all to no purpose. Every night the Mouse King appeared from nobody knew where, and continued to woo the Princess. Even the illustrious Murr and her sons had failed to locate him, and one of them had even fled on catching sight of the Mouse King.

But this was not all. Only the previous night the Mouse King had appeared as usual and had informed the Princess, in no uncertain tones, that on the following Saturday night he would carry her off, willy nilly, to his kingdom.

There was no time to be lost. It was now Friday evening, and much remained to be done. As soon as ever they had finished their coffee Ehu and the Astronomer rose and begged the King's permission to return to their hotel, promising to come back with the Nutcracker the next day. Their request was immediately granted.

It must not be imagined that during the

return journey Nikky had been allowed to forget all the instructions and exercises which Ehu had taught him before they set out. As soon as ever the camp fire was lighted of a morning, Ehu saw to it that the Nutcracker carried out his exercises properly. First came a quarter of an hour's fencing, then ten minutes with the boxing-gloves, then a series of high kicks, besides exercises in jumping, spinning on one toe, and turning somersaults. By the time these gymnastics were over a pleasant smell of fried bacon usually announced that the Astronomer had succeeded in preparing breakfast. Nikky's appetite was large, and as the travellers seldom accomplished less than twenty miles a day, he was soon in splendid fettle. Ehu himself grew younger every day.

So there was no fear of Nikky failing to overcome the Mouse King on the score of physical weakness. Indeed he was now so lithe and athletic that he could toss a nut into

the air, turn a complete somersault, spin ten times on his toe, and then catch the nut in his teeth as it fell. In fact he caused quite a lot of interest in the hotel, for in pure lightness of heart he would leap on to the mantelpiece at a bound, jump high into the air, turn three somersaults, and alight on the middle of the table without breaking a single wineglass. In fact one of the guests offered him quite a large sum to join a travelling circus.

Ehu and the Astronomer returned to their hotel deep in thought. This time they were determined to leave no stone unturned in order to ensure success. Such a calamity as had occurred during Nikky's last performance at Court must be prevented at all costs; and less than twenty-four hours remained for them to concert their plans. So they went straight to the top of the house and climbed on to the roof; for although schemes of their own contriving might be brought to nought, yet the stars could not fail. Whatever may

be read in the stars will come to pass as surely as night follows day. Eagerly and with trembling hands the Astronomer proceeded to cast a horoscope. At first this was somewhat obscured by a maze of tangential diaphanics, but presently it grew clearer and clearer, and to their great joy they read that not only would Nikky succeed in overcoming the Mouse King, but that he was destined to marry the Princess and, in due course, succeed to her father's throne. One thing only was to be guarded against: on no account must he eat the fruit of the Bangalu tree until he had caught hold of the Mouse King's tail.

Rejoiced by these happy auspices the two friends left the roof and regained their room.

"The question is," said Ehu, "how are we to make sure that Nikky gets hold of the Mouse King's tail? It will be a terrible combat, and the Mouse King is sure to keep his tail well out of the way."

"We must machinate, my dear Ehu,"

replied the Astronomer; "we must employ a stratagem. You remember the artifice Eris made use of to——"

He stopped and gripped Ehu's arm.

"Why not?" he cried excitedly. "Why should we not make use of the same ruse? Eris threw a golden apple: Nikky shall throw an orange Bangalu."

"My dear fellow," said Ehu, "your ingenuity is perfectly astounding. But—it the Mouse King succeeds in getting hold of the Bangalu fruit first, won't it upset our plans a little?"

"Of course," replied his friend; "but it's not bound to be a real Bangalu, is it? I don't suppose the Mouse King has ever seen a real one, and I'm quite sure you could contrive——"

"Say no more, my dear friend," said Ehu hastily. "I will go and find a carpenter's shop immediately after breakfast to-morrow."

Satisfied with their plan, the two friends went to bed; and presently nothing but Ehu's

bass snore was disturbing the quiet of the night. But before he went to sleep Ehu revolved the plan in his mind, and determined that the shop which he would visit next day, would not be a carpenter's one.

CHAPTER XVII.

How Nikky combated with the Mouse King,
and with what result.

Next day the travellers were up betimes, and immediately after breakfast Dappleblock went out into the town in order to set about making the imitation Bangalu. The Astronomer saw that Nikky went through all his exercises properly, and then told him precisely what he was to do. He even took off his coat and went through part of the performance with the Nutcracker, practising particularly that stage of it where the Mouse King's attention was to be diverted by the orange Bangalu. At the third trial, however, Nikky performed his part with such skill and agility that the Astronomer spun through the

air and fell heavily upon his nose. Nikky was anxious to practise it once more, but the Astronomer felt that he was now proficient enough.

At lunch time Ehu returned, and handed a small cardboard box to his friend. The Astronomer opened it carefully, and inside, surrounded with pink tissue paper, was a perfect and most inviting orange Bangalu.

"Really my dear Ehu," said the Astronomer, "you surpass yourself. We had better not show it to Nikky until just before it is to be used; otherwise he might treat it like the Krakatuk."

"It wouldn't take a Nutcracker to crack that, ha, ha!" replied Ehu mysteriously.

Then he took the Astronomer's ear between his finger and thumb and whispered into it

"No! have you really? Is that so? Capital, my dear fellow," said the Astronomer; "that should put the matter beyond all possible doubt."

Just before tea-time Ehu, carrying a small bag, set out for the palace with Nikky and the Astronomer. The King received them courteously, and himself led the way to the Princess' room. Here they examined the door, took up the carpet and stamped on the floor, poked their penknives underneath the skirting-boards, and examined carefully every chink and crevice through which it would be possible for the Mouse King to enter or leave the room. Then they carefully rehearsed the part they were about to play, the Astronomer persuading Ehu to personate the Mouse King upon this occasion.

At half past nine that night one of the Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary came downstairs and announced that the Princess was now tucked up in bed. So Ehu, taking up his bag and followed by the Astronomer, Nikky, and the King (who insisted upon being present on so historic an occasion), made their way upstairs to the Princess' room.

All was in darkness. They entered on tip-toe, and Nikky felt so excited that he could hardly keep still, and was obliged to nibble a nut all the time to keep himself quiet. How long they were there I am unable to say, but whether it was the darkness or the warmth, or merely because it was bed-time, certain it is that they all began to feel sleepy. First the King yawned twice and then began to nod, then Ehu felt his eyes closing, the Astronomer was wondering whether there was time for forty winks, and Nikky was curling himself up among the cushions in his chair, when suddenly there was a strange noise.

They all woke up with a start. The King could hear Ehu breathing heavily. Then all at once they heard a high thin voice, and next moment the Princess cried out.

Nikky was the first to regain his self-possession. With one bound he was in the middle of the room, and next instant he and the Mouse King were locked in a deadly

struggle!

The Chief - Nurses - Extraordinary came hurrying in with lights; the King drew his sword and seized a cushion with which to defend himself; whilst Ehu and the Astronomer danced excitedly round the combatants.

Nikky had seized the Mouse King round the middle and was rolling him over and over in a vain endeavour to grasp his tail. But the Mouse King, knowing that everything was at stake, was fighting magnificently, and kept swishing his tail from side to side just out of Nikky's reach.

I will not weary you by describing in detail every incident of that historic fight. Suffice it to say that at the critical moment Ehu, making a pre-arranged signal to Nikky, allowed the imitation Bangalu fruit to fall close to the King of the Mice, at the same time exclaiming:

“Look out! There goes the orange

Bangalu!"

The Mouse King made a furious effort, grabbed the fruit, and plunged his teeth into it!

For an instant his caution was relaxed, and Nikky grasped his tail firmly in both hands.

Instantly the Mouse King began to grow smaller and smaller and smaller!

At the same moment the Astronomer, deftly abstracting a genuine fruit from the air-tight box, rapidly stuffed it into Nikky's open mouth. Nikky took three hard bites on the luscious fruit and the Astronomer's finger.

Immediately there was a change in the situation. Nikky grew larger and fatter and stronger, his legs became shapely and muscular, his arms thickened, and with a terrible grip he squeezed the Mouse King with all his might. For one moment the Mouse King threw back his head and would have cried out, but his teeth were firmly embedded in the artificial Bangalu fruit, which Ehu had

cunningly constructed of caramel toffee. And so, unable to utter any further malediction or pronounce a single charm, he sank lifeless upon the ground. Nikky had squeezed the life out of him.

At this moment the King gave a shout and they all looked up. The Princess had risen from her bed and was standing beside her father, looking more lovely than ever. She was a young and exquisitely beautiful girl once more! Then she too gave a little cry, and they all looked at Nikky. No longer was he like a mouse; for he stood before them all, strong, lissom, and well, a handsome youth with curly chestnut hair and ivory teeth.

“Oh!” said the Princess, “there’s the handsome young man whom I saw at the Krakatuk tournament! I do like him so much, father.”

Even the King was amazed. Nikky was such a handsome fellow and so dignified and well-mannered and quiet. The King held out

his hand to him, and Nikky advanced hesitatingly. But though he took the King's hand he never took his eyes off the Princess the whole time.

"My dear," said the King, "let me present Mr. er—Nikky to you. He has done us a very great service indeed, and I'm sure you will like to add your thanks to mine."

Nikky dropped on one knee and pressed the Princess' hand respectfully to his lips. As for the Princess, she blushed so prettily and could only stammer: "Thank you *so* much, dear Mr. Nikky."

Just then the Queen entered the room. She took in the situation at a glance.

"You had better sleep with me to-night, my dear," she said to Pirlipatine; "these things are so disturbing." Then turning to the King, she said: "My dear, I'm sure Mr. Dappleblock and his friends are hungry after all their exertions. Won't you take them downstairs and give them some supper?"



This course seemed to all a wise one. Whilst they had been talking the Lord Great Scavenger (who had been sent for in haste by the Chief-Nurses-Extraordinary) had entered, picked up the Mouse King by the tail and carried him out. It was all over, Nikky had triumphed, the Princess was completely cured, and the anxieties of Ehu and the Astronomer as to their future were entirely set at rest.

Little remains to be told. On the following day the King held a Privy Council at which he announced that the Princess Pirlipatine was about to be betrothed to the Royal Prince Nikky of Krakatuk and Bangalu, Hereditary Prince of Chinchinjunga, and Grand Archduke of Pinchinjungaland. All the bells were rung, and the whole kingdom was soon en fete. The same day he held an Investiture at which both Ehu and the Astronomer were decorated with the Grand Cross of the Order of the Golden

Mushroom. The King's own tailor had measured Ehu for a new overcoat immediately after breakfast, and the Royal Eyeglass-maker was already busy fitting the Astronomer's face with a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. Ehu's diamond studded sword was taken in hand by the Court Jeweller at once.

But the King went even further. He caused Royal Patents to be drawn up creating Ehu a Peer of the Realm by the title of Lord Dappleblock of Berylia, and granting the Astronomer a Marquisate in Pinchinjungaland. Nikky, of course, was knighted there and then, invested with twenty-eight Orders simultaneously, and formally introduced to everyone as heir to the throne.

In the midst of this shower of honours Ezra Dappleblock suddenly appeared at the palace and demanded to see his son. But as he was unused to Court life and insisted upon eating asparagus with a knife, the King got rid of him with a pension of five thousand rose-

nobles and the monopoly of making toys within the Kingdom.

The Queen was not forgotten. The King was a sensible man, and he realised that her advice was really indispensable to him. So he gave her a pearl necklace worth all the rest of her jewels put together. In return she told him that as the pork harvest seemed likely to be the heaviest on record, it was her intention to make, with her own hands, as many black-puddings, chitterlings, and sausages, each containing a double quantity of fat bacon, as would last them until the next harvest.

As they crossed the hall arm-in-arm they caught sight of Nikky wandering about disconsolately. He blushed when he saw them.

"She's in the rose-garden," said the Queen. "You'd better go and join her."

And as Nikky and the Princess had been in love with each other from the very moment they had each resumed their normal shapes,

144 PRINCESS PIRLIPATINE

I will leave you to imagine what they said
to each other among the roses.

POSTSCRIPT.
(FOR GROWN-UPS ONLY).

An apology is necessary for presuming to meddle with the work of so great a master as Dumas. The reasons why I have ventured to do so are these:

Dumas wrote for French children; and although children are children all the world over, yet French children are not English children. So there are several passages which I have altered on this account. For the same reason I have added certain homely English details here and there. I have also altered most of the names and have invented new ones.

Secondly, Dumas makes the Mouse Queen's

action against the Princess so alarming that I am quite sure I should have had a good many nightmares if I had read it when I was a child. Children are imaginative beings, and morbid fancies play havoc with a child's peace of mind. Others to whom I have mentioned this matter agree with me; so I have taken a considerable liberty with the Princess here.

Lastly, Dumas brings his narrative to a close at the end of Chapter XI., weaving a brief ending (which I have not followed) into the story in which this tale is set. I must plead guilty to having perpetrated the rest. If it should amuse even one of these inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven and help to pass a rainy afternoon, I feel that I shall be amply repaid, and in some measure vindicated from the just charges of my discerning critics.

O.E.K!



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